



422 Post Road
Warwick, RI 02888
401-467-9940
www.ricadv.org
ricadv@ricadv.org
24-hour Helpline:
800-494-8100

Member Agencies

Blackstone Valley
Advocacy Center
Domestic Violence
Resource Center of
South County
Elizabeth Buffum
Chace Center
Sojourner House
Women's Resource
Center

Task Force

Sisters Overcoming
Abusive Relationships

Affiliate Members

Center for Southeast
Asians
Crossroads Rhode Island
Family Service of Rhode
Island
Progreso Latino
YWCA Rhode Island

To: Representative Marvin Abney, Chair of the House Finance Committee
Honorable Members of the House Finance Committee

From: Tonya Harris, Executive Director
RI Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Date: July 29, 2020

Re: **Support for Amendment to Budget Article 5 - Sustained Funding for Housing**

The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, our network of member agencies and SOAR, our taskforce of survivors, are writing today in **strong support of the proposed Amendment to Budget Article 5 (Question 3a)**. This section of the amendment proposed \$65 million to increase the availability of affordable homes and support community revitalization through new construction, redevelopment of affordable homes, property acquisitions and investment in local infrastructure or assets.

In 2019, the RICADV and its network of member agencies provided vital services for over 10,000 individual victims of domestic abuse. Of these clients, 405 individuals and their children stayed in our emergency shelters. Furthermore, the Victims of Crime Helpline combined with the agency hotlines received over 15,000 calls last year, many of which were related to housing. Safe housing options are vital to the survivors we serve. The RICADV is a proud member of Homes RI, a coalition of organizations working together to increase and preserve the supply of safe, healthy, and affordable homes throughout Rhode Island.

Even before COVID-19, Rhode Island was not sufficiently investing in the production and preservation of safe, healthy, and affordable homes. Residential building permits have decreased over the last 20 years; in fact, annual permits dropped by half between 2005 and 2018. An estimated 500 plus homes are lost each year to demolition or deterioration. In New England, we remain: 1) the only state without a dedicated funding stream for housing production, 2) the state with the lowest per capita investment in housing, and 3) the state with the lowest rental vacancy rate at 3.1 percent.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence conducts a point-in-time count for all participating domestic violence Coalitions every year. **On September 12, 2019, of the 111 unmet requests for services on this day in RI, 70% (78) were for housing and emergency shelter, due to a lack of resources to meet victim needs and the broader effects of the affordable housing crisis.** *"Callers are often frustrated when they discover there is no room for them in our shelter. We ask them to keep trying, and provide any services we can in the meantime. Sometimes it helps when callers know they are being heard and that we are taking their concerns seriously. Nevertheless, it is extremely disheartening for them to be told, 'I'm sorry, we have no room.'" – Domestic violence advocate from one of our RI member agencies*

Loss of financial stability and housing is a prominent reason that victims are unable to leave an abusive relationship. The societal costs associated with intimate partner violence are substantial. According to the CDC, the lifetime per-victim cost is \$103,767 for women and

\$23,414 for men. The lifetime economic cost to the U.S. population is \$3.6 trillion. This economic cost estimate includes almost 32 million women and 12 million men who are victims of intimate partner violence during their lives.¹ Poverty and income inequality are root causes of domestic violence. **No victim of domestic violence should remain at risk because of a lack of safe, affordable and fair housing opportunities.**

Housing costs have risen while inflation-adjusted wages of working Rhode Islanders have remained mostly stagnant. When wages do not grow over time, it becomes difficult for people to get ahead and has rippling economic effects. More than one-third (35%) of all Rhode Island households are cost burdened, meaning that more than 30% of their income is spent on rent or a mortgage and utilities. According to data from HousingWorks RI, the collective annual cost of Rhode Islanders overspending on housing is nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars.

To provide additional context, the 2018 average rent and utility costs for a two-bedroom apartment was \$1,621. The annual income needed to afford this is \$64,840. This amount is above Rhode Island's median household income and more than twice Rhode Island's median renter household income (\$32,043); nearly three times the annual income of a full-time minimum wage worker currently earning \$10.50/hour (approximately \$21,838). This misalignment between wages and housing costs is a significant contributing factor to our state's current housing challenges. We have also not kept up with creating adequate supply.

Rhode Island desperately needs sustained investments to create and preserve safe, healthy and affordable homes for Rhode Islanders. Years of underinvesting have left us far behind our New England neighbors, who have recognized that housing is a critical economic development issue and an important social determinant of health and community wellbeing.

Rhode Island voters consistently support affordable housing, having approved three bonds since 2006. Funds from these bonds, distributed through Building Homes Rhode Island, have supported the production and preservation of more than 3,200 long-term affordable homes. The vast majority (nearly 93%) of these homes are long-term affordable rentals serving households at or below 80% AMI (HousingWorks RI, 2020). A recent report from National Low Income Housing Coalition shows just how important long-term affordable rental homes are – 40% of Rhode Island households rent, and their median hourly wage is \$14.21. To afford a modest two-bedroom apartment in Rhode Island, one needs to earn \$21.16 per hour.

With an *expanded affordable housing bond*, we have the opportunity as a State to dually respond to Rhode Island's COVID-19 recovery and to take meaningful action to increase the supply of safe, healthy, and affordable homes, particularly for survivors of family violence trying to recover. It could not be more evident than during this global pandemic that home is the foundation of our health, economic, and community wellbeing. **We strongly urge the Committee to support the proposed budget amendment to Article 5.**

¹ Intimate partner violence: Consequences. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/intimatepartnerviolence/consequences.html>

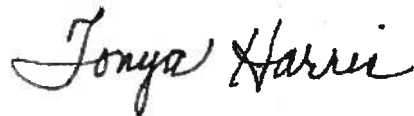
As we express our support for the establishment of a dedicated and predictable funding stream for housing, we are hopeful that the Administration and General Assembly will consider the urgency and importance of targeting funds to low and moderate-income households for creation and preservation of long-term affordable homes. Investments directed to low-income households ensure that:

1. Funds are going where there is the most urgent need, as over 70% of low-income households are cost-burdened;
2. There is greatest potential for impact, including cost-savings related to healthcare, and economic stability for workers and employers alike.

We believe that Rhode Island can and should be a state where all residents are able to live in safe, healthy and affordable homes in thriving communities, and reiterate our strong support for Article 5 (Question 3a).

We appreciate that housing has emerged as a priority this session and thank the Committee and Legislature for their careful attention to these proposals that have the potential to impact Rhode Islanders. Please feel free to contact us with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tonya Harris". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Tonya" and last name "Harris" clearly distinguishable.

Tonya Harris
Executive Director
RI Coalition Against Domestic Violence